Preserving Yiddish Culture in Canada: The Remarkable Legacy of Chaim Leib Fuks

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In the first two decades of the twentieth century, thousands of Eastern European Yiddish-speaking immigrants, fleeing poverty and persecution, found refuge in “America”, di goldene medine (“the golden land”). For them, America meant both the United States and Canada, without distinction. Unlike the German Jews who had settled in Canada decades before, or the Sephardic Jewish merchants from Holland, Belgium and England who had established themselves in Canada even earlier, Eastern European arrivals were slow to acculturate. As a result, the first significant body of Jewish literature to emerge in Canada was written not in the dominant languages of English or French, but in Yiddish. This literature was profoundly influenced by the Eastern European origins of the authors, the majority of whom were born in Poland (Fuks 438).

Yiddish culture flourished in Canada from the early 1900s until the 1960s. However, as early as the mid-1930s, concerns about the survival of the language were already being voiced, both in Canada and in Poland (Shmeruk 296), which, at the time, had the largest population of Yiddish speakers in the world. After World War Two, with the disappearance of Europe’s vital Yiddish-speaking communities, the language was in grave danger, not just in Europe, but also in the United States, Canada and South America. By the late 1950s, efforts were underway to preserve and memorialize the richness of Yiddish culture and its literature. The most ambitious attempt to preserve Yiddish culture in Canada consisted of the compilation and publication in Montreal of an encyclopedic biographical dictionary by poet and lexicographer Chaim Leib Fuks (1896–1984). In a large volume published in Yiddish in 1980 under the title Hundert yor yidishe un hebreyshe literatur in Kanade,¹ Fuks documented the life and work of 429 authors who published in Yiddish and/or Hebrew in Canada between 1870 and 1970. Read together, the biographies and bibliographies in the Fuks leksikon² convey in vivid detail all aspects of this literature and culture during the hundred years of its existence in Canada.

¹ Translated into French by Pierre Anctil as Cent ans de littérature yiddish et hébraïque au Canada.
² Like the German word Lexikon, the Yiddish word leksikon refers to an encyclopedia.
To begin with, they provide an overview of the development of the Yiddish language, historically as well as geographically, culminating in the flowering of Yiddish literature in the first half of the twentieth century. Yiddish had its origins in the migration of Jews to the German lands—the Rhineland, known in Hebrew as Ashkenaz—around the year 1000 (Petrushka 78; Katz 24). By the Middle Ages, Ashkenaz was home to the second largest Jewish population in the world, next to Spain. Whereas the Jews in Spain had enjoyed a relatively comfortable existence prior to their expulsion in 1492, the Jews of Ashkenaz were plagued by adversity. Massacres occurred during the first and second Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with persecution peaking at the time of the Black Death, for which the Jews were blamed. To escape persecution in Germany, they fled eastward, bringing with them their religion and culture, and their everyday language, a dialect of German, also known as Judeo-German since an important part of its vocabulary was Hebrew. It was this language that came to be known as Yiddish.

Welcomed into Poland from the twelfth century onward, the Jews of Ashkenaz lived an autonomous yet circumscribed existence conducive to the perpetuation of their own language and traditions. As early as 1264, the ruler of Greater Poland, Duke Boleslav, promulgated the Statute of Kalisz, giving certain rights to the Jews in his lands, such as the right to establish businesses or to govern their own communities. However, it was during the reign of King Casimir the Great (1333–70) that the number of Jews in Poland increased significantly. Although over the centuries Yiddish absorbed many Slavic words—especially after 1569, when Poland united with Lithuania to become the largest country in Europe, including what is now Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia and parts of present-day Ukraine—it remained the everyday language of Jews. They continued to enjoy extensive legal and administrative autonomy3 until the mid-seventeenth century, when Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants, led by Bogdan Chmielnicki, revolted against the Polish aristocracy, attacking hundreds of towns and villages and murdering Polish landowners and Jews. The situation deteriorated until the end of the eighteenth century, when Poland was partitioned by Austria, Prussia and Russia. Russia acquired the largest share, including Byelorussia, Lithuania and the Ukraine, with a Jewish population totalling one million.

With the partition of Poland, the Russian Empire became home to the largest Jewish population in the world, almost all of it Yiddish-speaking. To prevent Jews from entering Russia proper, Catherine the Great sealed off the